

LEARNING UNCUT EPISODE 21
IMPROVING THE ONBOARDING EXPERIENCE - NIC BARRY

- Michelle Ockers: Welcome to another episode of Learning Uncut. I'm Michelle Ockers.
- Karen Moloney: And I'm Karen Moloney.
- Michelle Ockers: Today we're talking to Nic Barry from Domain about how they revamped their approach to onboarding new starters over a period of two years. Welcome, Nic.
- Nic Barry: Thank you. Nice to be here.
- Michelle Ockers: Yeah, we're delighted to have you here, Nic. Let's start off with a description of who Domain is and what the organisation does.
- Nic Barry: Cool. So yeah, so Domain's had quite a huge journey over the last few years. So, formerly or originally we were basically the property listings vertical for Fairfax Media, so literally listings pages in the newspaper. But after some significant investment from Fairfax as a business, and some well-timed innovation in the mobile space with apps, we've essentially grown to be a holistic property technology company. So, we've got offerings in the listings, data, CRM, and media space for all of the different players in the property lifecycle.
- So that sort of came to a head probably at the tail end of last year where we're recently listed as a separate business on the ASX, so that's got a whole bunch of new opportunities for the business. And working in the people space definitely some pretty interesting work coming our way.
- Michelle Ockers: Yeah, and the business development, what the business has gone through there, has fuelled quite a bit of growth, I understand, over the past few years, which has had an impact on the work you do and on this particular project. Could you walk us through a little bit of what that growth has looked like in terms of staff numbers and the number of new starters that you're having to onboard?
- Nic Barry: Yeah, definitely. So a couple years ago when we were one of the levels of the Fairfax media building, nationally Domain was sort of 200 odd people, as a separate business unit. As it's grown over time we've moved into separate offices and spaces in each of the capital cities of Australia. Currently we're sitting just shy of 800 staff. So that's a huge amount of new staff over just a two and a bit year period. That's been a mix of organic growth, so new hires to fill the capabilities and new roles we've had as well as a mix of acquisitions. We've actually purchases some organisations and brought those.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah. I'd like to circle back to the acquisition question when we start talking about the scope of the onboarding program. But the other thing I picked up there was you talking about the number of offices and the geographic spread of the offices has actually increased as well, right?

Nic Barry: Yeah, definitely. So we always had a space in each of the Fairfax offices. Over the last couple of years as the teams have grown, in certain states that whole operating model has changed. So we've gone from like raised seller arrangements to, you know, internal staff. So that's basically been building out locations in, I don't know, five of our seven states and territories.

Michelle Ockers: So in terms of onboarding - and let's just talk about new starters for the moment - what sort of challenges has this business growth posed?

Nic Barry: Ah. Context. So in terms of every state being slightly different, so because we've tried to make it quite a personal touch for new starters in what's available in your offices, what's nearby, it basically means lots of reprinting and lots of rewriting. And then I'd say particularly when we were first starting our onboarding journey, a lot of, we had physical resources, handbooks. That was quite an expensive process to keep up to date and keep changing.

But yeah we've been lucky enough that now we've sort of settled into our office spaces with some long-term leases so the geographical context is fairly settled now. In terms of acquisitions, that's always challenging for bringing them into a business neatly. But a lot of it is sort of bringing that organisation as part of the Domain Group, so it's not necessarily changing the onboarding journey for those people but also explaining that acquisition. For example, we've branched out to loans and insurance comparisons and all those sorts of things. So communicating those to new starters is part of the collection of companies that make up Domain Group. It's basically keeping up to date what is Domain because it's constantly changing.

Michelle Ockers: So I am hearing that the goal around personalisation and change, as well as the maintenance of the material as the business keeps changing.

Nic Barry: Yeah.

Michelle Ockers: And so the onboarding program we're going to talk about today, I think the scope of it is just new starters. Is that correct?

Nic Barry: Yes, yeah, so new starters, generally from pre-staff through the first few months and then they sort of get picked up by a normal development programs and different initiatives we run with the bus ... I hate saying like business as usual in learning, but, you know, what we're doing for everyone is probably the way to say it.

Michelle Ockers: I did some work on onboarding with an organisation last year, and one of the first things we need to clarify was what exactly did onboarding mean to them? You talk to different people, they'll come up with different answers and the term induction gets thrown around as well and so what do you define onboarding as? What's, you know, where does it start, where does it end, and what's the purpose of it in your mind?

Nic Barry: Yeah, definitely. So like you said, depending on who you talk to, like particularly like HRS vendors, it can be from getting a record from like an ATS into our HRS with the info you need. They're not wrong. That's probably not the whole story or the whole picture. So to us we sort of saw it as being more about wholly attaching our new starters to our business, so to Domain. So it looks at covering the information they need as a new starter, the capabilities they will need for their particular role. And I guess incorporating them into our organisation's culture. So there's sort of the main aspects that we think actually influence someone's effectiveness as they start but also engagement as they are starting a new role. Yet it's not just about the systems, it's also about people as a whole being in the business.

Michelle Ockers: And it includes in your mind, the role, specific skills that they need to get going and competent and ...

Nic Barry: Yes, definitely. And that's the part where, depending on where in the business they are, that's going to be quite different. So what we do in the sell space is entirely different to our technology and product teams, through to our content and audiences. Yeah.

Michelle Ockers: Right.

Nic Barry: Tailored as best we can.

Michelle Ockers: So there's some core element of onboarding, and then it varies depending on role.

Nic Barry: Yeah, so how we sort of feed is we've essentially got our national onboarding, which is what everybody in the business will go through. That's essentially the Domain information and sort of relevant to all. And then each sort of business unit or team will have its own parallel, I guess, workflow that covers off that role's specific info and systems and resources.

Michelle Ockers: So apart from meeting this high velocity organisational growth, what other reasons did you have from creating onboarding at Domain?

Nic Barry: The team here actually kicked it off while I was still watching from afar at Fairfax. And I guess where they sort of started was pockets of the business did already have great onboarding in place. But it wasn't really consistent. So it was really dependent on who the manager was, who the hiring manager was, and a lot of the time down to circumstance. So someone, even with the same manager, may get an excellent experience, and other time they might be time poor and not so great. So basically, because that was when the business was starting to grow quite rapidly, there were processes in place to bring people on board.

But like I mentioned, they were quite manual. Sometimes with a lot of physical resources. And there was essentially like a complete head count needed to deliver a good experience consistently. That wasn't sustainable. So the basically idea was building sort of a national onboarding program to bring that consistency to everybody and sort of really sell this is what Domain is and what it's like, and also just make it easy for all of our different stakeholders.

So there's a lot of fingers in that onboarding pie. And just to make sure things don't get lost in communication and that things do happen.

Michelle Ockers: Okay. So you're trying to deliver a good experience consistently, make it easy for everyone involved, and make it efficient?

Nic Barry: Yeah, definitely.

Michelle Ockers: And you mentioned there's a lot of stakeholders involved. Who are the key stakeholders for onboarding at Domain, and how do their needs vary?

Nic Barry: I guess the biggest is we're looking to design the program, front of mind where we could, was the new starter themselves. So it was a mix of looking at not just the skills and knowledge that they need from day one, but we sort of brand ourselves internally as employee-experienced. So it was looking at that approach to their onboarding as well. So trying to keep the excitement for their new role. Essentially, give them everything they need to be successful and try and take away some of the mystery so that new role is far less daunting.

In terms of managers, it was mainly around enablement, so supporting them through that onboarding process. Primarily, we've done that just through prompts to ensure that they've thought of the things that they should be thinking of, done the things that they actually need to, and make it as seamless as possible. So ordering IT equipment and that sort of thing is literally an approvals process. And the others that we sort of kept in the loop as we designed were our office managers, so they're to get a loaded one, we've got a new starter on the way, and that date that you're to start. That helps them do essentially the desk setup. So that there's space for them in our offices allocated, but also a little bit of touch in terms of some swag and balloons and that sort of stuff when they do start.

And importantly, the super friendly IT guys, just so they've got the right information they need to order the equipment and have it ready to go for day one from 9:00 a.m. when they first arrive.

Michelle Ockers: And I think buddies were ... Was it buddy?

Nic Barry: So we didn't involve the buddies in the design of the program, but it's part of how we I guess tailor and support our new starters as well. So every new starter is allocated a buddy by the manager. And I guess the role of that person is to be that ... be the person that they can ask the dumb questions of. So the things you might be too terrified as a new starter to ask your manager, and also pass on some of that I guess cultural knowledge in the business.

To pass on some of the key knowledge from the business from key influences through to the best place to go for coffee on Harris Street or, you know, City Road down in Melbourne.

Michelle Ockers: All those little things that make it easy.

Nic Barry: Yeah, exactly.

Michelle Ockers: And just feel comfortable and welcomed into an organisation?

Nic Barry: Exactly, yeah. And to help them out, 'cause that can be quite an awkward conversation. We give them essentially a, here's a template to be a buddy, so things you might want to talk about, show them, and take them on a tour of.

Karen Moloney: Nice. Getting back to your, that wide group of stakeholders that you were dealing with, this also from managing stakeholders. How did you go about designing and developing the program and involving them in that process?

Nic Barry: Yeah. So from a design perspective, we basically went with the idea that people won't ever remember everything at once.

So everyone's always had that daunting experience where you've started in a business, you've hid a landing page in a HRS with a task of like 60 things to do, you're basically trying to literally tick boxes. You're not gonna remember the stuff. So the whole principle is looking at as almost like an arc to competence in their role. So with that in mind, we've basically, as a team and with each of those stakeholders, so a mix of recent starters, managers, helped us office manager, and then our wider HR team. Essentially started to list out all the things that we knew new starters needed to know and the things we'd like them to know, and essentially started to map it out as a process as a workflow because that's how we were viewing.

For the setup with the national onboarding, then for particular teams. So let's take one of our sales teams, for example. We interviewed particular sales

managers from different regions, so that was to really understand what was gonna be general knowledge for our national sales team, and things that would be really particular to market.

'Cause that basically positioned whether it's something we scale in a platform or prompts or enable managers to cover with their new starters. And then it was a mix of talking to sort of experienced staff to understand sort of the knowledge that they've gained over years in a role, you know, the parts of a role that aren't necessarily written down. Things that aren't explicit knowledge. And then also recent starters, and that was probably one of the most valuable groups, because it was basically understanding what they wish they knew that they didn't, or what should have been covered that wasn't. And a lot of that stuff was things that none of the other groups had mentioned.

Karen Moloney: Okay. That's interesting, that that will come with that experience.

Nic Barry: Yeah, definitely.

Karen Moloney: So can you give us an outline of the program and process in terms of what the key stages and activities? I mean, you've already mentioned there was sort of the national and local things.

Nic Barry: Yeah.

Karen Moloney: But I mean, as an overview of what that onboarding program was like.

Nic Barry: As a whole. Yeah, definitely. So, yeah. Essentially, there's two strains running at one time, as we've said. There's the national onboarding that everyone will go through, and role specific. Essentially it's all anchored around a start date. So we look at pre-start activities, so things that happen before the first one joins the organisation. That's essentially kicked off from contract being signed. From that point, we view them as an employee and we can start bringing them onboard. So that will be a mix of drip fed content to build a little bit of heart.

So the things that you'd think of like sort of vision and strategy, as we mentioned before, the companies that make up our group and sort of the markets we operate in. And then the second we hit start date, we basically pivot into a post-start. So that sort of starts to drip feed the functional bits and pieces they need for their role. You know, things to get up and running in their first few days like, you know, how to book meeting rooms. We're a Google organisation, so how to use Google apps versus Office.

And then obviously the compliance pieces that we all have to cover. So, like, yeah, health and safety acknowledgments and access to policies and that sort of thing as well.

Karen Moloney: Okay.

Nic Barry: And then for particular roles, it's drip fed as well, but that's generally a mix of, you know, for our sales teams for example it's a mix of product and system knowledge that they need interlaced with conversation guides to managers. So touch points, you know, every couple of days, every week, you might want to discuss this, cover this. And that's that sort of market specific or team specific info. And then, again for the sales teams and for national onboarding, that's sort of capped off with face-to-face interventions.

So everyone in the business goes through, you know, welcoming you sessions, we do quarterly meet and greets, which is like a Pecha Kucha, Ignite style event that people meet new starters. And then, you know, face-to-face interventions to cap off that sales workflow as well with here's how, you know, how to sell soft-selling skills program that supplements the product and system stuff they've already covered.

Karen Moloney: In terms of the personalisation for new starters, is that mainly around sort of the role and the context in which they will be pursuing that content, or is it, do you come up with it being mapped to an individual how they're working through the program?

Nic Barry: So it's a mix of both. So we do have the logic that alters the workflows based on the role. So that can be from the extra workflows they receive around product and system knowledge through to logistical questions. So we tailor the messaging around, you know, the choice of IT equipment, for example, based on the function the person's sitting in.

The sort of deeper personalisation that we've worked into the program is a lot of the about me as a new starter. So, questions about my likes, interests, motivations. That's all captured and shared with the team before the person starts. So the idea behind that is they've got some, they can have the deeper conversations from day one, it's not the awkward chitchat. It's actually things that are relevant and interesting to the new starter. Part of the about me we capture, you know, what seems like meaningless questions of what's your favourite snack, but in the background, we've got a workflow that sort of gets that to each office manager who has that on their desk of day one. So it's that little small moment as they arrive.

Karen Moloney: That's nice.

Nic Barry: Yeah, exactly, little old me? It can be a little bit challenging sometimes, particularly the diverse workforce. There's some very interesting snack requests that you can get a bit creative with how you meet those. And there are the other parties essentially that buddy relationship that we've spoken about already support. When the manager is selecting that, they're sort of very encouraged to think about the about me that's come from the new starter already along with, you know, what that role is going to be doing to really select someone that's going to be the best fit for that new person.

And I mean, like we said, it's all the things you're too afraid to ask your manager. But if we make that fit well, it continues past our, you know, first three months that we recommend they do have someone that they're quite, you know, connected to in the business from day one.

Karen Moloney: Yeah. Okay. So thinking about the maintenance the program, you mentioned when we're doing prep to onboarding, it's definitely not a set and forget activity or program. What do you do to monitor the program on an ongoing basis to make sure that it's performing and that it's being maintained?

Nic Barry: Well, I don't know about anyone else's businesses, but ours isn't ever static. So we change a lot and whether it be from acquisitions to, you know, change of our operating arrangement like being listed. So the information that we give to new starters and provide to new starters needs to change as well.

The other aspect that we see to it is because it's not just about the inducting. We really do want them sort of onboarding into our culture. Our culture's constantly evolving as well. As we've recently had a brand new CEO and there's a lot of enthusiasm and change that's come with that as well.

So basically, we tailor the information that's being sent to new starters as we would tailor any other calms or aspect of our culture as we evolve as a business.

The other piece we look at is the platform we use actually gives us some pretty great analytics on the information that's sent out. So what's been opened and when, you know. So based off that, we've tweaked not just the content itself, so changing what we know is most relevant to new starters, but also the format we use. So it's always, it always has been a mix of like text, image, video through to like e-learning models for products sort of stuff. But how we've used each of those over time has changed. And in particular, the timing of things as well. So we did originally have things spaced out more than we do at the moment, but, you know, we've forgotten a little bit how enthusiastic some new starters can be. So we've actually tightened that up a little bit to give more information sooner than we thought.

Karen Moloney: Is there a particular format, or are any of those that, what performs better?

Nic Barry: Probably no surprise to listeners, but video goes pretty well. We're very sparing when we use I guess ... I won't call them, they're not even new/traditional any model, they're all sort of scenario-based. But even those, we use very, very sparingly. For the most part, it's sort of rich/copy with images and video is sort of the most popular which works well for us because it's what we can sort of be most agile with as well.

Karen Moloney: Yeah.

Nic Barry: Videos, if we've got a topic, they're generally pretty easy to edit and redo the narration. And text and images are very, very simple. So it makes it easy to keep it up to date too.

Karen Moloney: So we know onboarding is such a critical activity in any organisation, and there's many organisations out there who are struggling to do it well. So what lessons, good or bad, could you share with our listeners for some things they can do to improve their own onboarding program, or feeding to a new program?

Nic Barry: So the big thing is that something's better than nothing. Don't fall into the trap of going into I guess analysis paralysis and trying to build the absolute perfect onboarding program off the shelf. Start doing stuff. New starters don't know what they don't know, so any content and information you can give them is good and far better than nothing.

So start with the most critical information for your business and then build it out over time. So like we said before, it's never gonna be a finished product. It isn't set and forget. So you don't need to have a finished project when you eat lunch.

Karen Moloney: And I think that that's the thing that's come out in a lot of the other podcasts that we've done and just different people that I talk to. I think that it is just about just getting stuck in and just starting. Just doing something different. Because you could sit there for months and months and months trying to plan out, you know, like you said, the perfect onboarding program.

Nic Barry: And now it's out of date.

Karen Moloney: People just need information.

Nic Barry: Definitely.

Karen Moloney: They need to feel at home and hit the ground running as quickly as possible, so how do we get them there?

Nic Barry: Yep, exactly. Step by step.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah. And connection, of course, is the other important one, right?

Nic Barry: Yes, definitely. So I think the big part was involving managers in designing it as well. So we were able to do a little bit of a sell as we were building, 'cause it was communicating I guess some of the benefits of this is actually going to make your life easier. You know, your new starters will be more attached, they're more likely to stick around. And they basically had that flying from launch 'cause they had input.

Michelle Ockers: So Nic, you've used a platform to actually set up your workflow and to be able to do things like automate, sending out requests for the 'about me' information

to new starters, pushing out nudges to managers to get things done at certain times, of course. Some people aren't going to have a platform available to them to use for that. And I know before you actually got it on the platform, I've seen some footage of you with postage notes stuck all over the place on a wall.

What advice would you give people who don't have a platform? What's still possible? So rather than have people dismiss the approach and say, well, we don't have a platform to host this on so it's not going to work for us, what could they take away from what you've done and make it work without a platform?

Nic Barry: Well, really, the platform was mostly to scale. As I mentioned, Domain already had an onboarding process in place. Moving it to the platform meant we could have richer media and make it automated with a lot more integration into other systems. But if you're able to define what that onboarding journey should look like for a new starter, and that's literally just process mapping, right? It's looking at what content you want to deliver when. There's no reason that a person can't guide a new starter through that journey as well.

Granted, you might do a much lighter touch because it would be time intensive. But it just goes back to that same piece of something's better than nothing. So if you can get started, even if it is a manual process, I guess the experience for that new starter sort of does become its own business case where you can resource this over time. And I mean, we've used a specific onboarding platform and it is pretty shiny and amazing, but there's parts of this that you can do in, you know, your traditional learning management system. If you get clever with, you know, course notifications, you can do similar things with platforms that people already have access to.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah, so work with what you've got, basically.

Nic Barry: Exactly, yeah. So that was literally the Domain journey, right, was we worked with what we had and built it over time. And then when that business case for a platform made sense, away we went. And that's sort of where we're heading next as well with, you know, new HRS systems and learning platforms as we move away from Fairfax. It's just a matter of that's our next step of integrating this platform with those more tightly.

Michelle Ockers: It's never really over though, is it?

Nic Barry: No, never. Nothing is.

Karen Moloney: I think about that, Michelle, you and I had a chat a little while ago about using an email marketing tool for that workflow automation. That tool was free on my personal link. To that end of the show knows we did a little video, we did a demo on that, because that's something that you know, if you don't have a platform, you can still get access to free tools that allow you to drip feed.

Nic Barry: 100 percent.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah. That thinking of it as a campaign, right?

Nic Barry: Exactly. 'Cause it is that same thing. So think of almost path to purchase, path to confidence, it's gonna be a similar journey.

Michelle Ockers: Absolutely. So Nic, let's circle back to business benefits. What have been the benefits to the business of the changes that you've made to onboarding?

Nic Barry: Probably the biggest one is what we are striving for, is that it's essentially the experience for new starters and managers. So for both, we've had a consistently outrageously high NPS. So for both, it's well into the 90s for that onboarding experience for both the manager and staff perspective. The other measure we've just gotten access to is we've recently done our most recent engagement survey, and the amount of comments that come out not just in the learning space but essentially like what are we doing right as a business ... In terms of what are we doing right as a business, onboarding actually featured higher than most other things. It was probably the most frequently commented on aspect. And even just a resourcing point of view. From a business case perspective, yes a platform does cost money, but originally we nearly had an entire head count maintaining just our onboarding process.

For my team at the moment, whilst it's never set and forget, it's actually quite a small part of what we work on, because so much is automated. What we're looking at is essentially the content, and that's freed us up to work on, frankly, more interesting and meaningful work than manually sending emails. It is more into that sort of strategic thinking of what do we include in the program and then freeing us up to work on other things as well.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah. Fantastic. So you've got the kick in employee engagement and the improvement in efficiency.

Nic Barry: Yeah.

Michelle Ockers: Which is what you were after.

Michelle Ockers: So Nic, when you were talking about benefits there, you used the term NPS. Some of our listeners may not be familiar with that term. Would you like to explain what NPS is and what it tells you?

Nic Barry: Yeah, sure. So it's Net Promoter Score or Net Promoter System, depending who you talk to. But it's basically a way to measure essentially would that service or activity be recommended. So does that person find it useful or attached. The question you use to measure it is always how likely would you be to recommend X to a colleague, friend, family member. And how it's calculated is essentially three different ways. You've got promoters, detractors, and people who are

neutral. It's always a 10-point scale, and essentially those who answer nine or 10 are seen as promoters. The idea is they're essentially rating fans that would actually go out and recommend that, I guess, platform or product.

If you're sitting in, you know, your seven and eight bands, particularly being cynical Australians, a seven or an eight is a yeah, you're sitting on the fence, you could go either way. And essentially anything below a six is seen as a detractor. Your score is essentially anything from -100 through to 100. And the idea is that you essentially count your nines and 10s, ignore your sevens and eights, and subtract anything that's below a six.

Michelle Ockers: Fantastic. I think you just completely demystified Net Promoter Scores for us. I understand why we get those annoying little surveys.

Karen Moloney: That's the best explanation I've ever heard.

Michelle Ockers: So Nic, we've got one final question which we like to ask of all of our guests. Could you share with us the biggest thing you do for your own professional development?

Nic Barry: The biggest thing's easily just how many interesting people you can shout coffees for. So in our space, there's not a great deal of awesome formal learning we can do for ourselves, so it really is about sharing what everybody's doing, what everybody's working on. Maybe not with REA people, but from other industries, seeing what people are doing in the space of, you know, from digital learning through to program design. I think I've also been lucky enough to have some pretty great sponsors in senior people leader roles and seeing HR roles to sort of sponsor some pretty weird initiatives. So actually being able to try something new, even if it is on a small, experimental scale. It's basically that test and learn process. What works for your business, what works for, you know, my style, and also what interests me, really.

So it's not at all any type of formal learning. It is basically that connecting, networking through meetups or coffees, and just trying stuff out. So get started giving something an attempt and see how it works.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's how I became aware of the program, when I was working on the onboarding piece I talked about earlier. I went out and looked through social media who else had done interesting stuff with onboarding, and someone referred me to you, and we had a conversation.

Nic Barry: Yeah, definitely.

Michelle Ockers: I learned a lot, which I hope our listeners will as well out of this conversation.

Nic Barry: Hopefully. No, not a problem at all.

Michelle Ockers: Nic, we'll include a link to your LinkedIn profile if anyone would like to get in touch with you and get that networking going and speak to you more about the topics from today's episode in addition to the resources that we'll share in the show links. Nic, thanks for speaking to us today.

Nic Barry: Thank you very much.

Karen Moloney: Thanks, Nic.